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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2017

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER ARTHUR'S POPULARITY CONTINUES TO CLIMB

REF: 06 BRIDGETOWN 1708

Classified By: DCM Mary Ellen T. Gilroy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: A recent public opinion poll confirmed that Prime Minister Owen Arthur remains the most popular Barbadian politician and is well-positioned to lead his Barbados Labour Party (BLP) to victory in parliamentary elections expected later this year. David Thompson, PM Arthur's rival and leader of the opposition Democratic Labour Party (DLP), has failed to generate momentum in his campaign and continues to struggle against perceptions that he and his party are not ready to lead the country. While the poll also showed that there is a widespread desire among Barbadians for a change in government, PM Arthur's continued dominance of Barbados' politics will probably be sufficient to secure an unprecedented fourth consecutive term for his administration.

END SUMMARY.

A BOOST FOR PM ARTHUR

¶12. (U) On March 4, the daily Nation's "Sunday Sun" published another of its periodic public opinion polls, conducted in February and early March in all of Barbados' 30 constituencies. The poll again found PM Arthur to be the most popular politician in Barbados, with 52 percent of the poll's respondents giving him the thumbs up. PM Arthur saw his approval rating improve by three percent since the last poll conducted five months ago (reftel). Other BLP members fared less well. The poll found that only 13 percent of respondents named Deputy Prime Minister Mia Mottley as their preferred candidate for prime minister, down from 15 percent in September. Only five percent supported Clyde Mascoll, the former opposition leader who crossed party lines to join the Arthur administration as a Minister of State in the Finance Ministry in February 2006.

OPPOSITION SUFFERS

¶13. (U) For Barbados' opposition leader, David Thompson, the latest poll was full of bad news. Only 28 percent of the respondents named Thompson as their choice for the prime minister's job. His popularity changed only slightly from the 29 percent approval rating he garnered in the previous poll. The DLP's efforts to generate some momentum in their campaign are not yielding results, since only 22 percent of those polled view the party as ready to lead Barbados. Thompson can take heart from only one result of the poll:

within the DLP, Thompson's leadership is unquestioned, with 81 percent of those identifying themselves as DLP supporters naming Thompson as their choice for prime minister. For a party that only a year ago was in a leadership crisis following the departure of Mascoll, this is probably a welcome sign.

DLP FAILS TO EXPLOIT BLP VULNERABILITIES

¶4. (U) PM Arthur's approval ratings have been undoubtedly buoyed by Barbados' relatively solid economic performance over the past two years. With unemployment at its lowest level in decades and economic growth forecast to top four percent in 2007, PM Arthur, who also serves as the country's Finance Minister, can claim some credit for these achievements. However, economic issues continue to top the voters' concerns. Four of the top five "major national issues" identified by the poll's respondents were pocketbook issues: cost of living, unemployment, housing, and the economy. High cost of living was a concern for nearly a third of those polled, mirroring the recent public outcry over climbing prices, especially of food. Thompson and others in the opposition have sought to capitalize on these concerns, but they have yet to offer a convincing alternative to the voters. Some commentators have speculated that with the departure of Mascoll from the DLP, the DLP lost its most trusted and respected voice on economic issues and may not be able to regain the voters' confidence in time for the election.

¶5. (C) However, that is exactly what Thompson must do in order to take advantage of the growing number of Barbadians who say that it is time for a change in government. The poll found that 42 percent of respondents would like to see a

change in the country's government, up from 38 percent last September. Nevertheless, as Thompson's low approval ratings show, those 42 percent do not necessarily view Thompson as a viable alternative to PM Arthur. Last fall, Thompson and his DLP appeared to kick their early campaigning into high gear, with weekly townhall-style constituency meetings and frequent, high-profile attacks against the government's record on key economic issues. However, as this latest poll shows, the DLP's efforts have yielded no results.

¶6. (C) Following the December 11 victory by Sir John Compton in St. Lucia's parliamentary elections, commentators in Barbados speculated whether Thompson might be able to pull off a Compton-style upset. The latest poll indicates that such a result is unlikely. While pre-election polls in St. Lucia were often contradictory, most observers agreed that the race was too close to call. That is not the case in Barbados. Thanks to PM Arthur's popularity, the BLP remains the only party trusted to govern in Barbados. Furthermore, Compton, unlike David Thompson, is a proven leader, having steered his country to independence in 1979 and served as prime minister from 1964-79 and 1982-96. Thompson's only stint in government was during the early 1990s, when Barbados faced an economic meltdown and the DLP government proved completely inept at handling the crisis.

BABY FIRST, THEN ELECTION

¶7. (U) PM Arthur recently revealed that his wife was expecting their second child later this year. In making this happy announcement, PM Arthur also said that he would not call the election until after the baby's birth: "I could not be in a position to be rushing from the platform to Pampers; that couldn't work." The earliest possible date for the parliamentary elections would therefore be sometime in the fall of 2007.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The latest poll has undoubtedly generated some

soul-searching within the DLP. Clearly, a significant number of Barbadians desire a government change, but the DLP has been unable to convince potential supporters that the opposition is ready to lead the country. Thompson has failed to articulate a clear vision or a set of policies that his party would implement to address Barbadians' chief concerns. This inability to connect with voters, combined with his incessant attacks on PM Arthur and the BLP government, have done little to build up his image as a leader. While it appears unlikely that Thompson could win a national contest against PM Arthur, Barbados' parliamentary elections are decided in individual constituencies on a first-past-the-post (simple majority) basis. If the voters who are tired of the BLP-led government look past Thompson and vote for the opposition candidates in their constituencies, the DLP could still have a slim chance of winning. However, PM Arthur's strong showing in the latest poll shows just how slim that chance is.

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